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The reorientation of public service motivation: Through the lens of SDT

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Abstract: Public service motivation (PSM), or literally “the motivation to serve the public”, is a form of prosocial motivation. It was proposed back in 1990 as a major research theme in public administration within the scope of altruism. It refers to people’s commitment to the public interest, compassion, and interest in policy making. However, this is misleading as prosocial motivation is never purely altruistic in nature. For example, many high-rank public officials make public policies simply due to media pressure or public scrutiny. Therefore, we use the motivational typology in self-determination theory (SDT) to explore the egoistic side of PSM. Our new SDT-based approach shows that there should not be a universal measurement tool for PSM. Scholars need to first identify a given public service behavior, and then develop measures for intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, and external regulation for this behavior.

Key words: Public Service Motivation, Public Service Behavior, Self-Determination Theory, Altruistic Motivation, Prosocial Motivation

1. Introduction

Public service motivation has been one of the dominant topics in public administration (PA) research. During the past two decades, public service motivation has become a major focus of PA research (Perry, 2014). The majority followed Perry and Wise’s approach (Perry & Wise, 1990): Public Service Motivation (PSM), which was defined as “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations.” Compared with private sectors, scholars believe the public employees have higher willingness to contribute the public interests or serve citizens (Kjeldsen, 2012; Perry, 2000). The PSM literature has achieved remarkable growth since 1990 (Perry, 2014; Perry, Hondeghem, & Wise, 2010).

From 2000 to 2010, more than 125 articles were published in the peer-reviewed public administration journals (Perry, Hondeghem, & Wise, 2010). And this number doubled from 2011 to 2016. When PSM literature keeps growing in the U.S., scholars from other countries tried to introduce this theory to different cultures. Ritz and Brewer (2013) found there are more than 43 countries have been involved in PSM research.

Perry (2014) concludes that the longitudinal development embraces three waves. The first wave of studies focuses on definition and measurement development (e.g., Brewer, Selden, & Facer II, 2000; Crewson, 1997; Francois, 2000; Perry, 1996, 1997, 2000; Perry & Wise, 1990). The second wave examined the theory by confirmation and international diffusion. These

studies examined the causal factors and outcomes of PSM in various aspects (Alonso & Lewis, 2001; Bright, 2005; Chen & Hsieh, 2015; Chen, Hsieh, & Chen, 2014; Houston, 2000; Kim, 2006; Liu, Tang, & Zhu, 2008; Moynihan, 2010; Scott & Pandey, 2005; Vandenabeele, Scheepers, & Hondeghem, 2006). Now we are in the third wave, but the themes are still uncertain. Probably it is time for reflection and reorientation since there are increasing criticisms (Bozeman & Su, 2015; Prebble, 2014; Ward, 2014; Sun & Gu, 2016).

During last decade, researchers' primary interests include how PSM develops, and which effects of PSM have on individual and organizations. The studies on the PSM's antecedents show that both individual factors and institutional factors influence PSM. The individual factors include demographic characteristics, socialization, professional identification, political ideology, and religious faith (Bright, 2005; Camilleri, 2007; Chen et al., 2014; DeHart-Davis, Marlowe, & Pandey, 2006; Sanjay K Pandey & Stazyk, 2008; Perry, 1997; Perry, Coursey, Brudney, & Littlepage, 2008; Vandenabeele, 2011; Ward, 2014). The institutional factors include job characteristics, organizational institutions, reward, leadership, management reform, organizational socialization and membership in professional organizations (Bellé, 2014; Bellé & Ongaro, 2014; Camilleri, 2007; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Perry, 2000; Taylor, 2008; Wright, 2007). Furthermore, researchers also examined the effects of PSM on individual behaviors (Bright, 2008; Liu, 2009; Liu et al, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Wright and Pandey, 2008), such as job satisfaction, commitment, principled reasoning, volunteerism, and willingness to blow the whistle, etc. (Ertas 2014; Liu and Tang, 2011; Taylor and Westover 2011; Ritz, 2009; Pandey et al, 2008; Bright 2008; Camilleri and van derHeijden 2007; Houston, 2006; Camilleri 2006; Castaing 2006; Houston, 2005; Choi 2004; Brewer and Selden 1998). Additionally, some evidence demonstrates PSM

has positive effects on individual and organization performance (Bellé, 2013, 2014; Brewer, Selden, & Facer II, 2000; Kim, 2006; Ritz, 2009; Bright, 2007; Leisink & Steijn, 2009; Naff & Crum, 1999).

Indeed, the PSM research made a significant stride. However, it also spawned a variety of critiques regarding its definition and measure (Bozeman and Su, 2014). It has more than 23 definitions (Prebble, 2014). And it is often interchangeable with altruistic motivation or prosocial motivation, and the measures of contemporary PSM (e.g., compassion) contain both values and attitudes (Taylor 2008), making PSM less likely a form of 'motivation.' With the confusing definitions, we are not surprised that there are more than 42 different measures have been used to measure PSM. And the most studies utilized different measurement scales (Prebble 2014), which include single-item, a single dimension with multi-items, and multi-dimensions with multi-items. It is hard to say those scales are measuring the same concept. These various scales make the research findings unlikely comparable.

With these flaws, we suggest scholars to study the motivations for public service based on a mature motivation theory: Self-Determination Theory (SDT). In the following sections, we will first debate the definition problem and propose the new paradigm of public service motivation research. Then we will introduce SDT-based motivation typology and discuss how to apply SDT in public service motivation study.

2. Critiques and reflection

There are two critiques with PSM conceptualization. First, scholars did not identify a particular public service behavior before defining motivation which made PSM less likely motivation. Second, self-interested motives may also drive public service actions; but most studies just simply describe PSM as holy altruistic motivation.

Bozeman and Su (2015) pointed out that almost all the PSM studies narrowed down the sphere of motives for public service behaviors to pure altruistic motives. Scholars also asserted PSM is intrinsic motivation without external rewards, and even a calling or benevolence (Houston & Cartwright, 2007). If PSM is a type of motivation, then it should be “the motivations for public service behavior”. Do motivations of public service exclude self-interest motives? The public service behavior is a type of prosocial behaviors. However, the motives can either be altruistic or self-interested as well (Baston & Shaw, 1991; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). For the public service behavior such as increasing the budget for community service, we are not sure whether the public employee’s motivation is a kind of social responsibility to do things good for the community (altruistic motivation) or just desire for the political power (self-interested). Or the purpose may be to respond to the public pressure (external motivation). If PSM is a sort of holy altruistic motives, how could we name those non-altruistic motives of public service behavior? Scholars simply exclude the self-interested motives and make PSM biased.

Increasing critiques on PSM conceptualization predict the possible reconstruction in the future. What would be the future direction of public service motivation research? A feasible solution is to use “motivation for public service (MPS)” in the future studies and avoid using the terms like PSM or Public Service Motivation. It means the motivation for public service behavior. The motivation for public service should not be added with any values or ethics. Building on this conceptualization, we can define different types of motivations based on the specific behaviors. The future researchers should consider four aspects:

First, the motivation for public service is a neutral concept. It may contain both positive and

negative values (e.g. self-interested motives vs. altruistic motives).

Second, scholars should identify a particular public service behavior before studying public service motivation. The motivation is distinct from values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Third, there are different types of public service behaviors. Therefore, we should not expect a universal measurement scale for public service motivation. Researchers could design different measurement for each public service behavior.

Fourth, motivation has different categories such as intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, or altruistic motivation and egoistic motivation. Therefore, the motivation for public service should include not only intrinsic and altruistic motivations but also the extrinsic and egoistic motivations.

Compared with PSM, the term “motivation for public service” has different orientation. But they are not contradictory. The PSM theory found the employees in public sectors have stronger prosocial or altruistic predisposition than those in private sectors (Perry & Porter, 1982). Scholars focus on this predisposition and discuss how to promote and preserve this trait (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Perry, 1997). The new approach in the present study will not deny the existence and function of altruistic motivation. But we admit the reality that the egoistic motives and extrinsic motives are also significant for the public servants’ altruistic or prosocial behavior. If the pure altruistic and intrinsic motivation of public employees is an expectation by PSM scholars, our new approach would be more comprehensive.

Fifth, the motivation for public service includes autonomous and controlled motivation, altruistic and egoistic motivation. If we believe the intrinsic and altruistic motivation may predict positive performance and wellbeing, then it is

critical to discuss how self-interested and controlled motivation can transform into altruistic and intrinsic motivation.

3. Reorientation of public service motivation by Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has been empirically tested in many aspects. The motivation typology by SDT was applied in various issues and disciplines, such as athletes' behavior (Pelletier et al., 1995), marriage and interaction (Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990), smoking (Williams, Gagné, Ryan, & Deci, 2002), church worship (Baard, 1994), students' learning and performance (Hayamizu, 1997; Vallerand et al., 1992), etc. Scholars also linked SDT to organizational variables, which include leadership, performance, goal-setting and work attitudes (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Sheldon, Turban, Brown, Barrick, & Judge, 2003). Based on this, a variety motivation measurement scales were developed and examined in different countries (Gagné et al., 2010; Tremblay, BlaNchard, Taylor, Pelletier, & Villeneuve, 2009; Gagné et al., 2015).

Why do we believe SDT is a better tool to reorient public service motivation than other motivation theories? First, SDT is a mature motivation theory and has been applied in PA research (Chen and Bozeman 2013), despite its scarcity. Furthermore, SDT-based motivation research requires an identified behavior, which has a clear boundary with attitudes, values, or beliefs. Additionally, SDT motivational typology allows motivation for public service to be conceptually differentiated from prosocial motivation or altruistic motivation. Based on SDT, the public service behavior can sometimes be driven by egoistic motives regardless how noble it appears (Batson 1987). And we are reminded by SDT that the motivation for public service can be facilitated by either intrinsic or extrinsic motivations. Most importantly, SDT explained

how controlled motivations could be internalized into autonomous motivations. Therefore, SDT would be an excellent tool for reconstruction of public service motivation.

3.1 SDT and Motivation Typology

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), in the early stage, discussed internal motivation and how external control influence autonomy and internal motivation (Deci, 1971). The first integrative framework was proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985) 30 years ago. SDT is distinct from the traditional motivation theory. Researchers used to classify motivation by intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy. Intrinsic motivation refers to an individual doing something because of interests and the pleasure when he or she behaves. Extrinsic motivation means people act because of external rewards or punishment like the money reward or physical punishment. However, the dichotomy of motivation typology is crude. For example, should we define the motivation for promotion and career development as extrinsic motivation? In some cases, people seek promotion because of honor and self-esteem, which is not pure external motivation but more likely internal motivation. To further investigate extrinsic motivation, Ryan and Deci (2000) classified it into three types: identified regulation, introjected regulation and external regulation (see Table 1).

Identified regulation means the individual identifies the action is valuable and meaningful. For example, students learn mathematics because they love it; then they fall into **internal regulations**. But many students do not like mathematics. They learn it just because they find math is important for their future career in engineering and Economics (external conditions). In this case, they still have a positive attitude with learning math. Both internal regulation and **identified regulation** belongs to autonomous motivation because personal autonomy is not controlled by external conditions.

Table 1 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

	Extrinsic			Intrinsic
Regulation	External	Introjected	Identified	Internal
Locus of control	Strong external	Somewhat external	Somewhat internal	Strong internal
Self-determination	-2	-1	+1	+2

Source: Chen and Bozeman (2013)

People falling in **introjected regulation** do something not because they identify the value of the activity or the external rewards and punishment, but in order to avoid anxiety, shame, and pressure (Vallerand & Ratelle, 2004). **External regulation** refers to external control, and it can be either reward or punishment. Employees are motivated by external regulations if they work for the bonus. People falling into introjected regulation and external regulation cannot perceive autonomy. They are controlled motivation (Frey & Jegen, 2001).

The four types of regulation are not mutually exclusive but may exist simultaneously. People can have strong internal and identified regulation at the same time (autonomous motivation). Others could have introjected regulation and external regulation in the meantime (controlled motivation). But there are very few people have the both strong internal motivation and strong external motivation. Because the two may offset each other. Once the autonomous motivation goes up, controlled motivation goes down. This phenomenon is called "motivation crowding" effect (Frey & Jegen, 2001). To capture the collective effects of different regulations, self-determination index (SDI) was developed (Ryan & Connell, 1989; Chen & Bozeman, 2013). Internal regulation has

strongest self-determination and is followed by identified regulation. Therefore, they are assigned by +2 and +1 respectively. Due to a stronger external locus of control attached to external regulation, -2 is assigned to external regulation whereas -1 is assigned to introjected regulation. Then the formula to measure the overall level of self-determination is:

$$SDI = 2 * (intrinsic motivation) + 1 * (identified regulation) - 1 * (introjected regulation) - 2 * (external regulation)$$

The SDI has strong potential in public service motivation study. It can be used to measure the self-determination level of recruits or the existing employees. SDI has similar function with the overall score of PSM. However, the absolute value of SDI is meaningless unless it is used to compare with different employees. For example, we can compare the SDI of different public managers or compare the teachers' SDI in public schools and private schools.

3.2 Apply SDT-based motivation typology to study public service behavior: The example of public managers

Policy-making is the primary job of public managers. In the PSM

measurement scale, attraction to public policy-making is one important component. How should we understand the motivation for policy-making through SDT? First of all, the public managers can be motivated by internal motivation, which means they feel happy when making policies. In other words, this job itself is interesting to them (internal regulation). But not every employee like this work. Some of them may believe policy-making is valuable for the public; or they find this job can improve their capability of managing and planning, which would be meaningful for career development in the future. People doing this because they identified the value fall into identified regulation.

Furthermore, some public managers make policies in order to avoid internal anxiety. Anxiety may come from their compassion when they see the underprivileged are suffering, or they want to prevent the citizens' criticism and change government's negative image (e.g., public servants are lazy and self-interested). This type of regulation is like "fear of losing". The purpose of the actions is to avoid anxiety, which is named with introjected regulation. Lastly, it is possible that some public officials make policy because of personal interest (rewards). Or they are driven by their superior leaders, even the pressure from citizens and media (punishment). For example, the public officials may be afraid of being blamed or punished if they did solve problems. This type of motives belongs to external regulation.

The public service behavior could be driven by internal and external motives or egoistic and altruistic motives simultaneously. When a public manager

would like to make a good policy, his or her motivation could be that he or she wants to get more experience to improve personal competence (identified regulation); at the same time, he or she also wants to avoid public critiques through the new policy (external regulation). Then SDI could be a good tool to investigate how autonomous the public manager would be (self-determination). And the most interesting issue is to analyze whether the internal motivation or altruistic motivation will go up when the external motivation or egoistic motivation goes down. Researchers call this phenomenon "internalization", which is "an active, natural process in which individuals attempt to transform socially sanctioned mores or requests into personally endorsed values and self-regulations" (Deci & Ryan 2000).

4. Conclusion

Public Service Motivation (PSM) has become one of the key issues in PA research. And it is one of the few PA theories got recognition in economics, psychology and political science (Perry et al., 2010; Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015). In the first section, we reviewed the longitudinal development of PSM literature and discussed its problematic definition. We found PSM conceptualization has two main flaws: analyzing public service motivation without an identified behavior, and narrowing down the motivation of public service to altruistic and internal motivation. Second, we discussed whether it is reasonable to accept the current PSM definition and make adjustments. And we conclude the best strategy is to reorient the concept through SDT. The future studies should try not to use PSM or

Public Service Motivation terms so as to avoid confusion. The motivation for public service should be literally understood as motives to do public service. The new measurement would be designed based on SDT. And there will not be a universal measurement scale fit for all public service actions.

The new approach based on SDT has obvious advantages than PSM. First, the majority of PSM scholars split motivation out of the behavior. Building on SDT, the new approach, can be named with “motivation for public service”, must identify a specific behavior prior to investigating motivation. And it will not be confused with attitudes, values or beliefs. Second, the SDT classified motivation into four types in a continuum, which has more advantages than the traditional dichotomy of intrinsic-extrinsic motivation. The motivations for public service behavior can be either self-interested or controlled. This new method would be more comprehensive and effective to explain public employees’ various behaviors. Third, SDI is a powerful tool to

understand how autonomous when a public worker conducts a certain behavior. It measures the collective effect of internal regulation, identified regulation, introjected regulation and external regulation. Comparing with PSM overall score that only include autonomous motives, the SDI value is more reasonable and applicable. Lastly, SDT defines motivation as a continuous spectrum. Controlled regulations can be internalized into autonomous regulations if the basic psychological needs are supported. The public managers could improve the performance and employees’ subjective wellbeing through facilitating the internalization process. The more autonomous public service behaviors are the better performance and job satisfaction the employees will be. The internalization theory and three basic needs have much potential in future PA research, which can be linked to many important issues such as: red tape, hierarchical control, merit pay, training, and public trust, etc.

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